

INTRODUCTION TO “A CONVERSATION WITH HSIEH TEHCHING, FROM *THE BLACK COVER BOOK*”

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In 1993, before they would arrive at their current acclaim, Hsieh Tehching, Ai Weiwei, and Xu Bing convened in New York City to discuss art, personal choice, society, and the individual, among other abstractions. At that time, New York was an adopted home for all three artists. Hsieh arrived from Taiwan in 1974, and Ai from Beijing in 1981, followed by Xu in 1990. The city was an intellectual seedbed for the Chinese émigré community, its urban fabric an incubator for creative projects that would resonate in a still-opening and still-reforming China. One such project was the now-renowned Chinese art publication *The Black Cover Book*, the intended destination and motivation behind the dialogue translated here. Published in late 1993, this thin black journal was famously distributed through unofficial channels to reach China's art circles.

The city of New York had been an irreplaceable backdrop to the monumental series of live-art performances that Hsieh executed there over five twelve-month intervals between 1978 and 1986—his *One Year Performances* series. In *One Year Performance 1978–79 (Cage Piece)*, Hsieh spent the year living in a small wooden cage; in *One Year Performance 1980–81 (Time Clock Piece)*, he punched a time clock on the hour every hour for one calendar year; in *One Year Performance 1981–82 (Outdoor Piece)*, he lived entirely outside and did not enter any sheltered spaces; and in *One Year Performance 1983–84 (Rope Piece)*,

Hsieh and performance artist Linda Montano tied themselves together with an eight-foot-long piece of rope. For *One Year Performance 1985–86* (*No Art Piece*), the last in the series, he did not interact with art in any way; and on December 31, 1986, he vowed not to show his art again until his 49th birthday, on December 31, 1999.

Hsieh's feats of endurance and self-control were well known in New York at the time and were slowly gaining a reputation within China. Indeed, Hsieh was the headlining artist featured in *The Black Cover Book*. Thus, the two editors of the project, Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei, were keen to engage him in conversation, and this dialogue would tease out Hsieh's thoughts on postmodernism, value judgments, social systems, and more. It was a rare opportunity for three figures on the cusp of stardom to discuss their creative motivations and address questions that would resonate with the Chinese diaspora—issues such as cultural hybridity, civilizational strife (or its imagined presence), and the relation of art to society.

THE BLACK COVER BOOK: THE CULTURAL MILIEU

The Black Cover Book was originally envisioned as a quarterly journal, but only three issues would ultimately be published: the original in 1993, *The White Cover Book* in 1995, and *The Grey Cover Book* in 1997. (Xu Bing did not participate as an editor in the latter issues.) All three books have since achieved something of a cult status in China, with original editions now being prized collector's items. This is due to their significant influence on contemporary art practice and discourse. As the editors made explicit in their preface to *The Black Cover Book*, its content and scope were intended to provide a more vibrant and pluralistic engagement with art than that offered by the plastic arts favored by China's "official" art magazines such as *Meishu* (Fine Arts), China's oldest arts magazine, which is still printed today. Indeed, *The Black Cover Book* was conceived to be something quite the opposite. As editors Ai and Xu state in the "Editors' Remarks" introducing the publication: "This is an independently edited, self-published, and internally circulated scholarly document about modern art in China. . . . It includes primary documents on artworks and archival records and research . . . [and] focuses on the current international discussions and debates, and their relation to the evolution of Chinese culture." The editors were equally clear about their intended outcomes for the project, elaborating that "This medium will provide experimental modern

Chinese artists with the opportunity to show, elaborate on, and interact with others. This type of interactive participation, exchange, and discussion will provide a creative environment for Chinese modern art as well as promote its development.” They were aware of the power of the printed word to bring together communities and inspire social change. After all, Mao had proclaimed that the pen was an instrument of revolution, and having grown up during the Cultural Revolution, both Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei were well versed in Maoist revolutionary theory. Although the political implications of the publication may not be apparent from the dialogue nearly twenty years after the fact, *The Black Cover Book* could also be considered a recent addition to a long and esteemed tradition of politically inspired self-publication in the arts. This tradition belongs with Lu Xun and his *Selections of Modern Woodcuts* (1929)¹ and also includes Ai’s father, who wrote revolutionary poems from a Kuomintang prison cell in 1933 during the Civil War.

Although China in the 1990s was still recovering from a decade of isolation during the Cultural Revolution and the events in Tiananmen Square, its cultural genetics and modernist inclinations were more hybrid and much closer to the West than we generally acknowledge. Translations of radical cultural-political ideas had a long tradition in China, and they had profound implications. This is exemplified by anarcho-feminist thinker He Yin-Zhen’s journal *Natural Justice*, which has recently been recognized as the first to publish a Chinese translation of the Communist Manifesto in 1907, much earlier than the Chinese Communist Party’s version.² The visual arts were just as deeply entangled with the West, beginning with Jesuit painters at court during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and continuing into the 20th century with Chinese painters who lived and worked in academies and salons in Paris and across Europe before the war. Chinese artists—including some of the country’s most influential painters, who would later be embraced by the Communists, such as Lin Fengmian and Xu Beihong—have long been familiar with oil and canvas, modernism and abstraction.³

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- 1 Elizabeth Emrich, “Modernity through Experimentation: Lu Xun and the Modern Chinese Woodcut Movement,” in *Print, Profit, and Perception: Ideas, Information and Knowledge in Chinese Societies, 1895–1949*, ed. Pei-yin Lin (Boston: Brill, 2014), 64–91.
 - 2 *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, ed. Lydia Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
 - 3 See Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

More recently in Chinese history, and relevant to the editors of *The Black Cover Book*, the prolific translation of European ideas picked up again during what is widely known as the “literature fever” (*wenxue re*) of the 1980s, when Freud, Sartre, Nietzsche, and other intellectuals were translated into Chinese. This opening of the floodgates of information followed years of monotonous “Red” culture, such as the model operas of the Cultural Revolution. Not only did translations of European literature and philosophy reach young audiences for the first time, they also diversified a concurrent resurgent interest in Taoist and Buddhist philosophy. The 1980s were thus a rehabilitative and formative moment for all artists and intellectuals.⁴

Through its combination of images, interviews, and archival documents, including artist sketches and project plans, *The Black Cover Book* introduced Chinese audiences to a wealth of art practices, both local and international, that were either undocumented or little known in China in the early 1990s. In the absence of physical exhibition or gallery spaces within China, the publication offered the printed page as a space where a community of like-minded artists could convene. The book documents the studio practices of artists, many of whom have become familiar names in contemporary art: Song Dong and Wang Jianwei in Beijing; Zhang Peili in Hangzhou; Chen Shaoxiong and Xu Tan in Guangzhou; as well as artists in New York (Wang Gongxin, Zhang Jianjun) and Boston (Zeng Xiaojun). The editors put forth a new definition of “art” by showcasing photography as well as conceptual and experimental works—modes of production that hitherto had little or no presence in art publishing in China. In addition to artist profiles, articles on Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Jeff Koons were translated into Mandarin, while Hsieh’s *One Year Performances* featured prominently. Hsieh’s strong presence in the book emphasized its New York-centric bias, which was perhaps unsurprising, given that Ai and Xu both lived in New York and that the city and its art scene were central in their editorial decision-making.

The context surrounding *The Black Cover Book*’s production is crucial for understanding its impact on China’s small circle of conceptual

4 See Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, MoMA Primary Documents Series (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). For arguably the most comprehensive theoretical treatment of this period, see Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

and performance artists during the early 1990s. Although the publication was not explicitly political, it traversed unknown territory, and the new and untested, independent and foreign nature of its content made it potentially dangerous. Even today, censors raise eyebrows when artistic content is suspiciously abstract or is deemed to have the potential to fan the flames of “cultural degeneracy,” such as pursuing commercial interests.⁵

As Ai has discussed in a recent interview, the Shenzhen printing house commissioned to print the volume refused to do so at the eleventh hour. The decision was most likely an instance of self-censorship based on suspicions about unfamiliar material. But for the editors, such a hurdle meant that the proofs needed to be smuggled across the border to Hong Kong for printing.⁶ Following its surreptitious re-entry across the border into China, the book was distributed mainly among closed groups of friends. The audience for avant-garde art within China has always been relatively small compared to the more mainstream plastic arts, film, or literature (in fact, it is a community composed mostly of the artists themselves). Within weeks, *The Black Cover Book* found its way into the hands of its select, specialized audience, thus fulfilling its role as an underground, virtual meeting space for conceptually based art. The speed with which the book circulated and developed its wide renown are testimony to the dearth of Chinese-language publications discussing foreign or unsanctioned art in the period following the Tiananmen Square events of 1989.

The book was also hawked by artists outside Beijing’s National Art Museum of China, the most important exhibiting institution in the capital at that time. The action was historically pointed, for it recalled the guerilla-style Stars Art exhibition (*xingxing huahui zhan*) of 1979, which had been installed on the fence surrounding the same museum. The Stars Group has often been cited as the first contemporary art movement in China. Their manifesto demanded self-expression in the arts following the Cultural Revolution, and among its members were cultural luminaries such as Huang Rui and Wang Keping. With no

5 Recently, on October 15, 2014, at the “Beijing Forum on Literature and Arts,” Xi Jinping invited cultural figures from film, literature, and the performing arts to speak. His message was that “Art works should not be the ‘slaves’ of the market and should not bear ‘the stench of money,’” but should instead serve the people and reflect socialist values. The message echoes Mao Zedong’s 1942 “Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art.” See “China’s Xi points way for arts,” October 16, 2014, Xinhua News.

6 Author interview with Ai Weiwei, April 4, 2013.

nongovernmental space to exhibit their works, and the museum being unwilling to officially host such an exhibition, the Stars Group daringly hung their works in public, introducing self-expression back into the visual arts.⁷

In fact, the state's persistently limited tolerance for avant-garde artists and its silencing of creative expression meant that, by the early 1990s, there were still no official or sanctioned venues for live-art or conceptual practices. As experienced by artists living in Beijing's "East Village," a small artists' community on the capital's outskirts, extreme performance works clashed with a conservative cultural infrastructure. In his work *65 kg* (1993), for instance, artist Zhang Huan suspended himself from the ceiling, opened a vein, and dripped his own blood onto a hot plate below him, where it sizzled and filled the neighborhood with the smell of burning human flesh. On occasion, if the neighbors were scandalized, police were called in and artists were incarcerated.

In Guangzhou, located on the border with "free" Hong Kong, an artist collective experimenting with nontraditional media and performative techniques, the Big Tail Elephant group (or BTE, a group that included Liang Juhui, Chen Shaoxiong, Lin Yilin, and later Xu Tan), worked inside the official system. They held their first exhibition in a "Workers Cultural Palace," a vestigial Socialist-era community space intended for the cultural education of the masses. In the absence of exhibition venues, BTE also opted to intervene in public spaces: Lin Yilin's *Safely Maneuvering across Linhe Road* (1993) is one example.⁸ Lin constructed a small wall of cinder blocks to obstruct one of the busiest roads in Guangzhou; during his ninety-minute performance, he then migrated the wall—brick by brick—across the road.

Artists like those in the BTE, who were based far from the capital's politicized atmosphere, and artists who had experience overseas acted as crucial counterpoints to Beijing's creative community. Wang Gongxin, one of the artists profiled in *The Black Cover Book*, illustrated this biculturalism in his early, site-specific installation *Sky of Brooklyn—Digging a Hole in Beijing* (1995). Attempting to create an inverse version of the American myth of "digging a hole to China," Wang dug a hole in the floor of his Beijing house located in the tradi-

7 See Li Xianting, "About the Stars Exhibition," in Wu and Wang, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 11–13.

8 See the exhibition catalog *Da wei xiang (Großschwanzelefant)* (Bern, Switzerland: Kunsthalle Bern, 1998).

tional alleyway dwellings of the capital called *hutongs*. At the bottom of the hole, he placed a video monitor showing a video of the sky and passing clouds that he had filmed above his Brooklyn studio.

The Black Cover Book incorporated all of these geographically disparate practices to become a physical manifestation of the emergent biculturalism and of hitherto undernurtured experimental art practices across China. It opened a virtual space where conceptually driven practices converged, regardless of the artists' physical locations. As such, this radical act of self-publishing can be seen as a kind of conceptual artwork in itself.

THE DIALOGUE: TRANSCRIPTS FROM A FUTURE PAST

In the discussion with Ai and Xu, Hsieh observes: "We're all preparing to do something. Weiwei will go back to China. Xu Bing is in New York, and I will go to Taiwan. It's only a small change, but we're all preparing for something." These three artists were each on the verge of a significant life change, and the palpable sense of urgency in transition permeates their dialogue. What they do not explicitly acknowledge, even though it frames their relationship, is their shared immigrant experience and cultural-linguistic background. Yet this shared background is pivotal to their discussion. For example, by 1993, Hsieh Tehching was a seminal figure in the New York live-art scene. His Taiwanese origins made his celebrity status all the more poignant within China. Not only was he admired for the strength of his performances, but many artists saw Hsieh's acceptance into the "Western system" on merit alone as a formidable task. The feeling of marginalization that these three émigré artists shared can likewise be intuited through their dialogue. Hsieh says, "[Duchamp] was a marginal figure, but we are even more marginal than he. We shouldn't play at the West's game, but we have to understand it, that's the only way to undermine it."

Ai Weiwei's family history was also complex. His father, Ai Qing, was a nationally famous revolutionary poet who was sent into political exile during the Anti-Rightist Movement of the late 1950s. The entire family in fact was exiled to Shihezi, in the remote Western Xinjiang Province—where Ai Weiwei spent his childhood—until Ai Qing was rehabilitated in the late 1970s and they returned to their courtyard home in Beijing. In 1981, Ai Weiwei left Beijing for New York, where he became fast friends with Hsieh. Considering his unique family history

and his having spent his formative twenties in New York, Ai's intellectual makeup was formulated as a complex blend of influences informed as much by New York's East Village galleries as by Chinese visual and decorative arts. We know him today as a political activist, but Ai's important early editorial work is often overlooked. *The Black Cover Book*, and the later *White* and *Grey Cover Books*, clearly demonstrate a commitment to shaping a Chinese-language discourse in contemporary art.

By contrast, Xu Bing came from a more orthodox background and had academic training in the plastic arts. In the dialogue Xu expresses anxiety about redefining the artist's responsibility, a concern that reflects his training in the Chinese art academy. After Mao delivered the "Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art" in 1942, artists' social responsibility was made inseparable from the formal qualities of the artwork itself and was given highest priority within the Socialist Realist agenda. While the Cultural Revolution took formalism to an extreme, artists in the late 1970s were beginning to disentangle art's formal qualities from the artists' alleged social responsibility. Xu's work was central to that discussion in academic forums. He came to the United States in 1990, just three years after completing his breakout work *Book from the Sky* (Tianshu). Ai and Hsieh quickly sought out the creator of this intriguing work.⁹ *Book from the Sky* was a labor-intensive woodblock print installation of thousands of contrived and illegible "Chinese characters" printed on paper and hung to cover an entire room. The overwhelming amount of human toil necessary to produce such an immersive installation of woodblock-printed text—all of which was completely nonsensical—had absurdist connotations that evoked a poignant sense of hopelessness. After Xu's immersion in a foreign culture, these themes of repetition and human futility that had informed his early work began to give way to issues of cultural and linguistic exchange.

Despite their commonalities, the three artists each brought a different worldview to the dialogue. Compare their reactions to Duchamp, for instance, who in their discussion becomes the archetypal Western artist. As they debate his adaptability to changing times, Ai views him

9 See Mao Weidong, Stephanie Tung, and Christophe Mao, eds., *Ai Weiwei: New York Photographs 1983–1993* (New York: Asia Society Museum, June 29–August 14, 2011), exhibition catalog, 247, for a photograph of Hsieh, Ai, and Xu during Xu's residency in Madison, Wisconsin.

as an oracle: “Duchamp predicted future developments.” Xu conversely sees him as fulfilling an inevitable role within the changing tides: “Duchamp was just a guy with a gun. He was the first to use a gun. Before him, there were only bows and arrows.” And Hsieh demonstrates a self-effacing macrocosmic worldview: “He was a marginal figure, but we are even more marginal than he.”

The “system” emerges as a leitmotif in the dialogue, and readers will sense their alienation from what is posited as a “Western system.” Hsieh’s attitudes can be summarized in his opinion of the “system” and of the three artists’ own position relative to it: “As for the problem of whether or not we should intervene in the Western system: My point of view is that we shouldn’t even bother.” If the use of the term *system* feels unfamiliar in this context in English, it can perhaps be best understood as a parallel to Arthur Danto’s definition of the *artworld*: a cultural context or shared web of history, values, and theory.¹⁰ Xu, Ai, and Hsieh’s discussion of the “Western system” is based on a position of biculturalism and on a cultural opposition between East and West. This opposition of *zhongxi guanxi* (China-Western relations) is still frequently cited in the Chinese-language art discourse today, as is freedom of choice in the production of art, social responsibility, morality, and (perhaps the elephant in the room for contemporary art in China) the art market. Xu Bing presciently alludes to this current reality: “nobody is willing anymore to pay attention to a group of people who play without ‘making any dough.’”

The fourth (silent) participant in the discussion is the city of New York. More than mere backdrop, New York became an indispensable catalyst for the artists’ work, their friendship, and the production of *The Black Cover Book* itself. The city’s spaces provided the canvas for Hsieh’s tremendous yearlong performances; heaving with AIDS activism, labor strikes, and even solidarity protests with the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in the 1980s, New York also nurtured the budding activism of the young Ai Weiwei, who joined civil rights protests there; and it immersed Xu Bing in a new culture within which he could recognize the distinctive character of his cultural heritage. This period was transformative for Xu in particular. His *Square Word Calligraphy* (1994) may have resembled the earlier *Book from the Sky*, with its similarly illegible characters, yet each “character” is in fact an English word

10 Arthur C. Danto, “The Artworld,” *Journal of Philosophy* LXI (1964): 571–84.

created by nestling letters of the Latin alphabet within the appearance and semiotic trappings of a Chinese glyph. New York as interlocutor weaves its way into their dialogue via mention of artists such as Andy Warhol and allusions to a “Western system” that could also be understood as a fully mature network of galleries, museums, artist collectives, and criticism—something yet unavailable in Taiwan or China.

UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

Since *The Black Cover Book* was originally planned as a quarterly, the editors had circulated a call for submissions earlier that year entitled “Red Flag—Art Documents for Exchange.”¹¹ The Beijing address for submissions listed the curator Feng Boyi as addressee and included a beeper number; Xu Bing’s sender address was listed as 52 East 7th Street, New York City. The call for submissions describes *The Black Cover Book* as being for “art world insiders” and “not for open circulation.” Meanwhile its selling price was considerable for its day; it sold for the rough equivalent of 25 USD today.¹²

As with all things cultural in China—and despite the publication’s ostensibly nonpolitical content, as I noted earlier—politics have colored both the dialogue and the book’s release. The project was born in a tense political climate, and the internal editorial strife behind its production has likewise made history. The drama began with a disagreement over the book’s title. If popular oral histories are to be believed, the title of the book caused conflict among the editors. The more politically audacious Ai was in favor of the title *Hongqi* (Red Flag), a reference to the national flag and to China’s first manufactured automobile of the same name.¹³ Xu Bing allegedly felt that such a provocative title would cause unwarranted trouble for the magazine and its editors. The title *Heipi shu*, which translates literally to “Black-Skinned Book,” is thus a compromise between Ai’s politics and Xu’s concerns.

Still, the English title is misleadingly innocuous, as politics remain embedded in the Chinese original. *The Black Cover Book* is only the most literal translation; it could also, perhaps more cannily, be trans-

11 “Hong qi—Yishu jiaoliu ziliao” (Red Flag—Art Documents for Exchange), Asia Art Archive, www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/7689.

12 Author interview with Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao, April 2014.

13 As soon as the first *Hongqi* vehicle was produced in 1958, it became a central motif in the political spectacles staged on Tiananmen Square. A symbol of a strong, independent China, the Soviet-style car was the model Mao and all leaders since have ridden while surveying troops lined up for inspection.

lated as “Black Papers.” This translation would reflect the editors’ intended wordplay on “white papers” (*baipi shu*),¹⁴ official clarifications of the party’s stance on certain contentious political issues, such as Tibetan or Taiwanese independence.¹⁵

Ultimately, *The Black Cover Book* epitomizes underground publishing in contemporary China, and the short dialogue succeeds in crystallizing a set of still-relevant issues within Chinese-language art discourse today. While many observers of the Chinese art world are eager to disparage the authenticity or criticality of such a discourse, it is important to remember that publishing can be a critical act in itself, which *The Black Cover Book* manifestly demonstrates. Many factors contribute to the shortage of good art criticism within China, which can be best summarized as a lack of incentives and an excess of hurdles. Censorship is a substantial problem, and a strong contemporary art market supports an excess of soft advertising on what seems to be an ever-increasing number of new art media, websites, and print magazines that plagiarize indifferently and without deterrent. Considering this, the enterprise and idealism fueling this dialogue make it seem all the more urgent.

Just as importantly, *The Black Cover Book*, born of a unique historical moment and of a uniquely bicultural context, helped Chinese artists formulate their own self-conception as connected to a greater geographic and intellectual territory. No longer were they working in isolation, nor were the concerns of artists in China confined to a bamboo cage of their own construction. In a pre-Internet age, *The Black Cover Book* succeeded in bracketing together artists such as Hsieh, Duchamp, and Koons within a single space. As such, Beijing’s “East Village” was in closer proximity than ever before to the East Village of New York, even if it was only between the two covers of an ambitiously conceptualized publishing project.

14 On the question of the associations of this title with governmental white papers, see Ai Weiwei’s *Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006–2009* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 263 note 68. Although not cited in this footnote, the artist confirmed to me in a 2010 interview that the title was inspired by the white papers.

15 The Central Committee of the Communist Party’s (CCCP’s) white papers include “Human Rights in China” (1991), “Tibet—Its Ownership and Human Rights Situation” (1992), “The Taiwan Question and Reunification of China” (1992), and “Family Planning in China” (1995). A complete list of the CCCP’s white papers can be found online at www.china.org.cn/e-white/